

Minutes
Regular meeting of the City of Reading Planning Commission
April 22, 2014 at 7:00 pm

Members present:

Ermete J. Raffaelli, Chairman
Michael E. Lauter, Secretary
Wayne Jonas Bealer, Assistant Secretary

Staff present:

Andrew W. Miller, Planning Office

Others present:

Scott T. Miller, Stackhouse Bensinger Inc.
Lee C. Olsen, Olsen Design Group Architects Inc.
Kenneth L. Pick, Berks County Community Development Office
Thomas B. Ludgate, Ludgate Engineering Corporation
Glenn S. Worgan, Delaware Valley Development Company
David S. Johnson, Reading Eagle Company

Chairman Raffaelli called the April meeting to order, and asked for acceptance of the agenda. Mr. Bealer moved to accept the April 22nd agenda, as presented. Mr. Lauter seconded. And the Commission voted unanimously to accept the April agenda.

Subdivision and Land Development:

MDJ 23-3-09 District Justice Office – final subdivision and land development plan [0:00.00]

Scott Miller reminded the Commission of the ‘sketch’ presentation at the March meeting. He said there weren’t many changes, though the stormwater engineering was completed and a landscaping plan has been included. He acknowledged the April 18th Planning Office review, and didn’t feel there were any substantive issues in satisfying it. He requested the City Engineer’s review as soon as it becomes available. He said they aren’t proposing any sidewalk, given a perceived lack of pedestrian circulation and the surrounding industrial buildings. They will replace sections of the deteriorating curbing. Mr. Bealer noted the property neighboring to the south has sidewalk, and suggested they at least connect it to their driveway entrance, for those coming from the bus stop on Exeter Street. Mr. Pick agreed. Mr. Raffaelli asked if there remains enough setback for a possible sidewalk in the future. Scott Miller said there is, and that the grading itself would be ‘level enough’. He said some other landscaping is proposed around the building’s foundation. Asked if any clerestory windows or other fenestration was included on the east elevation, following the discussion at the March meeting, Mr. Olsen said not, given the particular uses of the rooms on that side and the way the design fits the two other sites being simultaneously considered. Andrew Miller suggested shifting some of the proposed trees to the other sides of the property, while recognizing the stormwater swales might complicate it. Scott Miller said he’d look into it. *[having forgotten to start the recorder, the first approximately fifteen minutes are missing from the audio file – the minutes to this point were prepared from the BCTV video]* Asked about the remnant rail spur entering the site, Scott Miller clarified that the part within the subdivided parcel would be removed. Andrew Miller asked that the extent be indicated on the plan. Mr. Bealer asked if they were seeking a sidewalk waiver. Scott Miller affirmed, and said the concrete curbing would be installed/repared to the City’s standard. Andrew Miller indicated his support, on Mr. Bealer’s condition of the partial extension and with the consent of the City Engineer. Asked if the shed depicted on the residual parcel had any relation to project, Scott Miller said not. He said he’d attempt to provide additional detail on the surrounding street topography, while doubting the availability of any additional information. Andrew Miller mentioned getting the same impression from the City’s Engineering Office. Scott Miller felt the City should eventually act to formally vacate what remains of Moss Street. Andrew Miller agreed, thinking it had all but been, by the other blocks already vacated. He asked if there had been any direct communication with Norfolk Southern Corporation. Scott Miller said not. He intended to submit the erosion and sedimentation control plan, once the City Engineer’s comments are received. He said the boundary would be physically marked. Questioned on the status of the zoning permit, Andrew Miller said that application and a copy of the plan were forwarded, and likewise to the County Planning Commission for their review. Mr. Pick intended to follow up on the latter issue. Asked about the possibility of a conditional approval, Andrew Miller said the plan would have to be tabled, and preferred to wait on the City Engineer’s review before action on the sidewalk waiver. He asked if plans for the other two concurrent projects had been presented to their respective municipalities. Scott Miller said Bern Township had just recently

reviewed theirs, but 'not yet' in Colebrookdale Township. Mr. Olsen presented revised elevations, including signage, and the floor plan, and its effect and limits on the fenestration designed. He called it an economical design, to be replicated on each of the three projects. Asked about the purpose of the cupola, he posited the aesthetic value, and its function in ventilation where no other rooftop equipment would be required. Mr. Lauter asked about the intended façade materials. Mr. Olsen mentioned metal siding, a shingled roof, and raised trim on the windows and corners. Andrew Miller confirmed that sufficient landscaping was fully detailed on a separate drawing sheet. Asked about the foundation design, vis-à-vis the modular construction, Mr. Olsen clarified that the construction is not prefabricated or *mobile*, but *modular*, and assembled on-site for efficiency and speed of completion. He mentioned heat pumps, which may or may not be a geothermal design after further study and performance specifications. He said they intend to seek bids as a 'design-build' project, with all three sites awarded in one contract. Andrew Miller offered to discuss, by phone, some of the more technical comments in his review.

Mr. Bealer moved to table the final plan. Mr. Lauter seconded. And the Commission voted unanimously to table the 'MDJ 23-3-09 District Justice Office' plan, pending the requisite permitting and documentation.

Homes at Riverside – sketch land development plan [17:41]

Mr. Ludgate said they wanted to present a 'first look' of their plan at Spring and Weiser Streets; a large parking lot among the former Dana Corporation properties, with street frontage on three of its four sides. He proposed 46 townhouses, with a 47th for the superintendent inside the community building. An internal driveway would provide access to the rear of the units, about three quarters of which include a one-car garage; the rest have a designated parking space. A few overflow spaces, a community building and a 'tot lot' play area are also planned. The prevailing slope will require some 'stepping' of the floor elevations. Sidewalk will be provided along the street frontage, where little currently exists, and curb aprons will be designed for the driveways. Street trees are already shown on the sketch plan.

Mr. Worgan presented the building elevations by colored renderings. He reported that his company has developed 25 communities with approximately 2000 units, by similar financing packages through the Pennsylvania Housing Finance Agency (PHFA). He said it includes commitments from the City and County, and some conventional loans. He described the exteriors as primarily brick, with some vinyl siding, variation in the setbacks, metal railing accents, and six-over-six panel windows, in attempting some compatibility with the neighboring homes. Asked about the size of the units themselves, he counted 23 two-bedroom units, at 1180 square feet each, and 23 three-bedroom units, at 1545 square feet each, in an 'interlocking' pattern, such that the party walls aren't necessarily plumb from ground to roof. He mentioned a letter from the Zoning Administrator approving the project. Andrew Miller, unfamiliar with the letter, asked if it included a permit or simply an opinion on the proposed use. Mr. Ludgate clarified that it wasn't an actual permit. Asked about the extent of the subsidization, Mr. Worgan said 'none' on the operation, but tax credits for the construction. He said they'd likely sell those to a corporate investor (*e.g.* a bank) in exchange for equity in the project. He described limits on tenant incomes and rents: up to 60 percent of the area's median income (or, over \$40,000, for family of four in Reading). Rather than 'low-income housing', he preferred to call it 'workforce housing', as the rents wouldn't be subsidized, and renters would pay their own utilities. The rates would range between \$620 a month, for the two-bedroom units, and \$881 a month for three bedrooms, with a few units reserved for handicapped tenants and renting for less. Mr. Raffaelli asked how they came to settle on this particular property. Mr. Worgan said he knew the former owners of the Dana properties (Bown, Industrial Investments Inc.). Andrew Miller wondered about environmental investigations and any concerns. Mr. Ludgate answered that the Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection (PADEP) had already 'signed off' on the matter. Mr. Worgan said the parcel was part of a larger consent decree covering the other former Dana lands, that the investigation was complete, and that the 'release' was approved the year before. Mr. Ludgate confirmed that the release covers residential uses, and intended to forward the documentation. Mr. Lauter asked for further explanation of the off-street parking allocation. Mr. Worgan said they'd originally designed a garage for each unit, but the handicapped accessible units required a wider garage, resulting in the current layout. Mr. Lauter questioned the sufficiency of the one-space-per-unit proposed, and the conformity to the Zoning Ordinance that typically requires a rate of 1½. Mr. Worgan referred to an exception for affordable housing projects. Mr. Lauter advised they consider the practical limitation, given the size of units and the average of multiple cars in each family. Mr. Worgan claimed that, in most of their projects, they estimate about one car per household. Asked if the surface spaces block access to the garage units, Mr. Ludgate said there are potential spaces outside the garages, though only the unobstructed spaces were used for the count. Andrew Miller asked what the zoning letter states, and whether it covered the use generally or the project as designed. Mr. Lauter complimented the inclusion of the masonry in the façade design, and asked that the rear elevations be included in the next presentation. He reiterated his concerns with the parking. Mr. Bealer advised that the landscaping proposal should account for the truck traffic experienced on Weiser Street, especially with the pattern changes from the Schuylkill Avenue Bridge rehabilitation. Mr. Ludgate described the thirty-foot elevation difference between the parcel's northwest and

southeast corners. Mr. Raffaelli asked about the tax projections and implications for the Reading School District. Mr. Worgan said the site is exempted as a Keystone Opportunity Zone (KOZ), for another 7 years, and a Local Economic Revitalization Tax Assistance (LERTA) designation. Mr. Raffaelli said that the parcel was never a part of the manufacturing activity. He recalled it was planned as a former (and third) City hospital, and in the 1930s was conveyed to the School District. Then in the 1960s it was traded to the Dana Corporation for what is now the site of Northwest Area (Baer Park) Elementary School, in order to avoid a demolition for 'School No. 5'. He asked about the annual School District tax payment. Mr. Worgan estimated, after the expiration of the KOZ, phased-in payments according to the terms of the LERTA toward \$24,000 in 2020, \$28,000 in 2021, et cetera, cumulative between the municipality and the School District. Mr. Raffaelli countered with his own estimates, and considering the average family sizes statistically associated with the targeted tenant demographic. Assuming three children for each of the 46 units, he calculated 138 new students. Mr. Worgan considered that number high compared to their other projects, and said they wouldn't all be simultaneously school aged. Mr. Raffaelli cited the City's particular situation as reflected in the Census Bureau numbers. Mr. Worgan said the tenants would come from elsewhere within the City. Mr. Raffaelli argued that they'd represent additional residents, unless removing a commensurate number of existing homes. Mr. Worgan offered that Reading is 'a growing city'.

Mr. Ludgate hoped to refocus on the subdivision issues. He said the site is currently zoned 'Residential 3' (R3), and that the project fits those parameters. Asked for more information about the community building, Mr. Worgan described a community room, an office, a kitchen area, a computer lab, and the second-floor apartment for a maintenance manager; 3200 square feet in total. Andrew Miller asked if the zoning letter addressed the density of the development, or granted any specific permission. Mr. Worgan said it conceded a 'by-right' use, and was based on a schematic depiction of 48 dwelling units. He said the letter was dated January 4, 2013, followed by a second letter, clarifying the first, dated January 8th. He read that no special exception, conditional use or variances would be required. Andrew Miller noted that the R3's minimum lot size is 1800 square feet, a standard not met in the plan presented. Asked for clarification on the parking requirement, he wasn't sure what section was being referenced in determining the 'one-to-one' standard. Mr. Ludgate intended to seek clarification.

Andrew Miller explained that no action was required for a 'sketch' submission. Mr. Raffaelli thanked the developer for their efforts, but maintained his questions and concerns. Andrew Miller asked if there had been any recent communication with the Zoning Office, noting that a copy of the sketch plan had been forwarded to the Zoning Administrator. Mr. Ludgate said not. While briefly reconsidering the revenue impacts, Mr. Bealer said he understood the KOZs to be applied to commercial and industrial developments. Andrew Miller said he had a similar understanding, or at least for lands formally in an industrial activity and where redevelopment is challenged by that history.

Other business:

§603.c.2 conditional use review-1233 Green Street (conversion) [1:08.00]

Mr. Raffaelli criticized the arrangement of the floor planning, given what appeared to be a total interior rehabilitation. Andrew Miller thought the narrow 'row home' construction limited the opportunity for alternate arrangements. Mr. Lauter resisted the focus on architectural issues, if already subject to a formal review by the building-code officials. Andrew Miller noted that it has already been recognized as a three-unit property, in some capacity, limiting the options: either restricting the use to two dwelling units, or allowing the third, ostensibly more conforming to the residential district than the commercial use had been. Mr. Bealer likened the application to several others previously considered by the Commission. Andrew Miller confirmed that there were no off-street parking areas on-site, and doubted their seriousness in pursuing off-site reservations unless made a formal condition of approval. Mr. Lauter suggested that an assessment of the parking impact depended on the use and intensity of the former commercial space. He doubted a satisfactory return on the investment of the renovation, if limited to two units.

Mr. Lauter moved to recommend City Council's approval of the third dwelling unit at 1233 Green Street, based on the information given. Mr. Bealer seconded. And the Commission voted unanimously to communicate the recommendation to City Council, for the public hearing scheduled May 6th.

Resolution #5-2014

review the draft March 25, 2014 meeting minutes [1:17.15]

Mr. Bealer moved to accept the March meeting minutes, as presented. Mr. Lauter seconded. And the Commission voted unanimously to accept the March 25th meeting minutes.

Resolution #6-2014

The Commission briefly recalled some past members and past projects, discussed the landscaping proposed for the

‘MDJ 23-3-09’ project, the need to appoint the Commission’s officers at the May meeting, and an upcoming public ‘open house’ introducing preliminary designs for the eventual reconstruction of the West Shore By-pass.

Mr. Lauter moved to adjourn the April meeting. Mr. Bealer seconded. And the Commission voted unanimously to adjourn the April 22nd meeting. – 8:47p